The Once and Future King:

Negotiating the Survival of Boys in 1990s Cinema

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Abstract

On the cinema screen, boyhood has often been depicted as a period of freedom, rebellion, and energy, a pre-cursor to manhood in which young boys are able to negotiate their identity and place within the world. In 1990s Hollywood, however, a wave of films turn to depicting the death of young boys on screen. As a result, boyhood becomes a site of vulnerability and weakness. This article seeks to examine the implications of these deaths, framing them within the context of a wider negotiation of masculinity and fatherhood politics. In addition, it questions the extent to which the deaths of these young boys can be read queerly, subverting the drive towards the future inherent in the figure of the child.

Keywords: 1990s, boyhood, childhood, death, dying, fatherhood, Hollywood

Introduction

Among the top-grossing family films of 1991 was *My Girl* (Howard Zieff), an often melancholy but ultimately hopeful reflection on childhood in 1970s America. Though the film ostensibly focuses on the character of Vada (Anna Chlumsky), a hypochondriac girl who suffers from a crippling fear of illness and death, the film is surely best remembered for the death of Vada's best friend, Thomas J., played by the foremost child star of 1990s Hollywood, Macaulay Culkin. A sensitive, bespectacled boy, Thomas J. dies after having an allergic reaction to the bee stings he sustains after disturbing a hive in the woods. The enduring image of Culkin in *My Girl* is of his character lying in a child-sized coffin, without his spectacles; Vada's hysterical protestations that Thomas J. "can't see without his glasses!"

punctuates the sedate atmosphere of his funeral. As *My Girl* ends, it is Vada who cycles off into the distance, contemplating the future. Thomas J. is reduced to a figure of the past, the childhood friend who never grew up. In the 1990s, it is one of a small but significant number of mainstream films that breach the taboo of child mortality. As in most of these films, it is a young boy who dies on screen.

In defining boyhood as an often overlooked stage of masculinity, Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward note, "Boys, it seems, are simply there" (2005: 1). They refer to the apparent invisibility of boys as a discrete entity, but their observation is enlightening when considered in relation to *My Girl* and other films of the 1990s that deal with the death of young boys. These boys are "simply there," the authors suggest; that is, until they are not. It is in absence that boyhood is made visible in the films discussed here. If boys are largely invisible until they become men, in terms of academic attention if not actual screen presence, then these films force a consideration of boyhood as a site of trouble, fragmentation, and erasure. It is the erasure of boys and the problematizing of their existence by throwing their mortality into stark relief that I examine here.

In particular, it is the cessation of youth, and, consequently, manhood, that motivates this discussion. The films highlighted below depict the deaths of young boys in various different circumstances, including accidents, murder, disease, and life-limiting medical conditions. This article will focus on four in particular: *My Girl*, *Lorenzo's Oil* (George Miller, 1992), *The Cure* (Peter Horton, 1995), and *The Mighty* (Peter Chelsom, 1998), with death resulting from accident and various illnesses. They are united by a broader theme, that of the end of boyhood. These films have received little critical attention to date, yet their unifying quality—a willingness to erase the boys at the center of their narratives—demands further consideration. The death of the child sees the safe space of childhood destroyed, and it is the implications of this destruction that will be examined.

The deaths of Thomas J. (*My Girl*), Kevin (*The Mighty*), and Dexter (*The Cure*), and the near-death of Lorenzo—not to mention their counterparts in the numerous other films mentioned below—suggest a fundamental fracturing of boyhood. No longer the robust figures of all-American boyhood—in Pomerance and Gateward's reckoning, "typically brash and dirty, covered with oil or grease or burrs or straw, freckled and wide-eyed" (2005: 2)—the presence of such characters suggests that young boys are suddenly a vulnerable demographic: not just because they are children, but because they are *boys*. Defining boyhood, as Pomerance and Gateward discuss, is fraught with contradictions and contrary beliefs over what constitutes a *boy*. Yet if boyhood is taken at its most straightforward and most basic, it is this: the stage of life for males who have not yet reached adulthood. As such, these are all films about boyhood in a very distinct way, for one simple reason: they concern boys who will never become adults. In film, representations of the boy are necessarily fleeting, the implication being that these on-screen boys will soon have moved beyond this stage of their lives. This expectation is subverted in these particular films. Boyhood is no longer a mark on the map to manhood, but an end point. Given these themes of fragmentation and vulnerability, centered on the bodies of boys, it is instructive to read these films within the context of masculine crisis and, more specifically, the cultural and political concerns surrounding fathering and fatherhood in the build-up to the millennium. Yet beyond this, it is perhaps equally useful to consider these films as potentially queer, subverting the predominance of a futuristic narrative in favor of collapse and erasure.

My Girl is a particularly interesting example, given its box office success ($60m) and its casting of Culkin—one of the "boy box office kings" (Pomerance and Gateward 2005: 4) of the decade—as the doomed Thomas J.. However, alongside those noted above, there were numerous other films produced in the US in the same decade that also depicted the death or imminent death of young boys on-screen, including *Paradise* (Mary Agnes Donoghue 1991),

Radio Flyer (Richard Donner 1992), *The Good Son* (Joseph Ruben 1993), *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee 1997), and then *Pay It Forward* (Mimi Leder 2000), *George Washington* (David Gordon Green 2000), and *A.I: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg 2001).

These films are located within a wider stable of films portraying the death of children more generally, including *A Map of the World* (Scott Elliott 1999), *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola 1999), and the Canadian film *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan 1997), suggesting a distinct preoccupation with the trope during this period. It must also be acknowledged that a number of films—including *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton 1991), *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson 1992), *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes 1993) and *Above the Rim* (Jeff Pollack 1994)—were produced during the same period, depicting the deaths of adolescent African American boys. Though this is a significant cinematic trend in itself, because of the scope of this article, my focus will be specifically on the deaths of pre-teen white boys.[1]

European cinema offers a comparable range of films dealing with the death or disappearance of a child during the same period, including *Olivier, Olivier* (Agnieszka Holland 1992), *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (Krzysztof Kieslowski 1993), *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (Bille August 1997), *Angela's Ashes* (Alan Parker 1999), and *La stanza del figlio* (Nanni Moretti 2001). Emma Wilson posits that "missing children" are more prevalent in independent and art cinema, including these European offerings, and suggests that

> [t]he issue of the missing child enables films to mobilise questions about the protection and innocence of childhood, about parenthood and family, about the past (as childhood is constructed in retrospect as nostalgic space of safety) and about the future (as fears for children reflect anxiety about the inheritance left to future generations) (2003: 2).

That these concerns become increasingly prevalent in Hollywood in the 1990s suggests that these American films are equally as deserving of critical consideration as those to which Wilson devotes attention. François Truffaut, in conversation with Alfred Hitchcock, notes that "[m]aking a child die in a picture is a rather ticklish matter; it comes close to an abuse of cinematic power" (1985: 109). Hitchcock himself had explored the theme of child death in *Sabotage* (1936) and later *Spellbound* (1945), highlighting a historical precedence for the trope that also includes the earlier, numerous adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Little Women*, as well as *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy 1956), the original version of *The Good Son*, and later films including *Don't Look Now* (Nicolas Roeg 1973) and *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford 1980).[2]

Despite the historical precedence, Truffaut's observation serves to highlight the difficulties of depicting a child's death on-screen. Low child mortality in the West makes any such representation inherently shocking to an audience. However, this is compounded by the aura of innocence and promise that is routinely associated with the child both on- and off-screen. The death of a child demands meaning in order to be justified. The "space of safety" that Wilson rightly identifies in relation to children on screen is effectively destroyed in the process. That mainstream films are willing to kill the boys at the center of their narrative, therefore, invites further examination.

Fatherhood and the negotiation of masculinity

Masculinity undergoes considerable scrutiny during this period, leading to suggestions of crisis rooted in anxiety and uncertainty, with the legitimacy of such a crisis debated at length (Chapman 1988; Faludi 1999; Kimmel 2012). I suggest that it is more useful to consider masculinity as being in a state of negotiation, sidestepping the rhetoric of crisis to examine one particular facet of this negotiation—the role of the father.

A number of factors brought fatherhood to the fore in the 1990s: cultural shifts in parenting; a significant divorce rate; the rise of dual-breadwinner households; and demands that men become more domestically involved, including contributing to childcare. Such cultural discussion was augmented by political debate over the role of the father, with President Clinton addressing issues of paternal responsibility, absentee fathers, and child support in a number of high profile speeches. Accordingly, fatherhood becomes a persistent theme in cinema during the same period, with Hollywood awash with flawed men who find eventual salvation in fatherhood. A central component of this salvation is the child—most often a son, or surrogate son—who offers the man a viable image of the future. Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel suggest that the child's ability to save the father is rooted in the child's inherent innocence (2001). They argue that this innocence was once ascribed to women (usually a romantic interest), but with the gains of feminism comes the perception that women are no longer *pure* enough to save men. As a result, the ability to save the father has been re-routed through the figures of young boys. If *Kramer vs. Kramer*'s (Robert Benton 1979) Billy sets the precedent, by the 1990s it is a well-established trope, from *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman 1990) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus 1993) to *Hook* (Steven Spielberg 1991), *The Santa Clause* (John Pasquin 1994), *Liar Liar* (Tom Shadyac 1997), and *Father's Day* (Ivan Reitman 1997), to name a mere handful.

Many theorists have argued that in addition to reflecting emerging political and cultural concerns, the shift towards a more involved, domesticated image of fatherhood on-screen represents a reaction to these contemporary negotiations of masculinity, a way of piecing together a masculine identity that, by the turn of the millennium, was becoming increasingly fragmented (Aronson and Kimmel 2001; Wood 2003; Bruzzi 2005; Tasker 2008; Hamad 2014). Kimmel suggests that in a post-feminist, post-capitalist landscape, many American men reported a sense of "impotence" (2012: 211); re-constructing identity around

fatherhood is one (literal) way of overcoming this and harnessing a sense of meaning. Robert Bly's well-known contention that "[t]here is not enough father" (1992: 92) underpins his argument that American boys were suffering from a lack of masculine guidance; the films discussed here reveal the opposite fear. There is not enough son, it seems, to render the project of paternal restoration a success.

The issue that arises, then, is one of failure: if the child functions as the savior of man, then what are the implications of young sons dying on screen? Robin Wood, writing on 1980s Hollywood cinema, identifies the "ideological project" of the "Restoration of the Father" (2003: 154). Such a project is fundamentally undermined by the deaths of the sons at its heart. The death of the child destabilizes the very drive towards the future it is meant to represent. It reveals the less-than-stable foundations of this presumption of generational progress and inheritance, and throws the splintering of masculinity into sharp relief in a period when Hollywood works very hard to disavow and repair this fragmentation.

The disruption of boyhood

As noted above, Thomas J.'s death in *My Girl* is all the more notable for the fact that the character is portrayed by Macaulay Culkin, who was one of many prominent boy actors who populated Hollywood in the 1990s. Having risen to considerable fame in *Home Alone* (1990) and its sequel (1992), Culkin became the face of innocent, exuberant boyhood on-screen: rebellious, playful, and yet, in appearance, suitably angelic. On the release of *Home Alone*, *People* magazine described him as "impish and heartwarming, as if the Little Prince had played hooky with Bart Simpson" (Gliatto 1990: 128). To see him struck down in *My Girl*, then, is to see an iconic image of all-American boyhood perish. Two years later, he would die again, this time as the *evil* boy in *The Good Son*. This is a considerably darker portrayal by Culkin, and works to undercut the more innocent image cultivated in his earlier films. Yet to

see his character die twice in this period is suggestive of the wider fragility of the boy on-screen. Culkin's star persona is constructed in no small part around the image of the resourceful, endearing Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone*. In Kevin, he embodies the contradictions of boyhood—a desire for freedom mingling with a yearning for his family, wrapped up in his determined quest to protect his home from invasion. Culkin grins, leaps and dashes through the film; to see this same face and body rendered mortal in *My Girl* and *The Good Son* is all the more striking for it. To witness Culkin fail to reach adulthood is to witness a failure to make good on the assumptions that bright young boys eventually become men.

The interruption of this boyhood-to-manhood trajectory is explored further in *Lorenzo's Oil*, *The Cure*, and *The Mighty*, three films that avoid the shock of Thomas J.'s death only by rendering their respective boys doomed from the beginning. *Lorenzo's Oil* explores the splintering of childhood promise through the figure of Lorenzo Odone, who develops the degenerative condition adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD). The film also examines the psychological impact of the child's probable impending death on his parents, Michaela (Susan Sarandon) and Augusto (Nick Nolte). In comparison to the other films discussed here, *Lorenzo's Oil* is unusual in that Lorenzo does survive. However, he does so in a permanently arrested state; adult maturity remains unattainable for Lorenzo. The value of boyhood is severely diminished by its permanence.

The degenerative nature of his condition means that Lorenzo's is essentially a boyhood in reverse. His acting out at school is not the first sign of boyish rebellion, but of a condition that will see him removed from the outside world, unable to participate or retain his place alongside his peers. Instead, he is confined to his bed, unable to move or communicate. These images are in stark contrast to those with which the film opens: a carefree Lorenzo running through a Comorian village, and flying his kite on the beach. In these fleeting early

scenes, Lorenzo incorporates the promise embedded within the figure of any young boy on the cinema screen. Yet the boy seen here playing on the shore does not advance beyond this stage of childhood. Rather, he regresses to an earlier state, dependent on his parents for all his physical needs. This is reminiscent of Freud's work on the death drive, and his observation that there exists in all of nature an "urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (2001: 36). If the boy on the beach is running towards a future, then this is abruptly ended by an opposite drive towards death that Lorenzo is powerless to resist.

The significance of these early scenes—and, indeed, Lorenzo's early years—taking place in Comoros is worth considering here. *Lorenzo's Oil* is based on a true story, and on one level these opening scenes simply reflect the facts: that as a result of Augusto's job at the World Bank, the Odones spent time living in Comoros before returning to the US. Yet within the film's narrative, it is only after the family has relocated to Pennsylvania that Lorenzo's symptoms begin to manifest. The real-life provenance of the story complicates a straightforward reading of this geographical significance, and yet the contrast between Lorenzo's life in Comoros and his deterioration in the US reveals a demarcation of the latter as a potentially toxic environment for boyhood. *Lorenzo's Oil* emerges alongside numerous other films focusing on dying American boys in the last decade of the twentieth century, a century often designated as the American century. As the American century comes to an end, these boys reflect the sense of uncertainty seen to be facing American men. If the turn of the millennium also marks a point at which the US must acknowledge that it is not the power that it once was, the boys and men in its midst must come to terms with the same knowledge. When Augusto suggests that they should "treat Lorenzo's illness like another country," he advocates a practical, research-based approach to their son's condition. Yet Augusto's phrasing once again links ALD with a geographical space, likening it to a foreign country that can be conquered through knowledge. Here, that foreign country is the United States. What

was once assumed to be known becomes unknown, and the US is rendered a hostile environment, an antithesis to the supposed safe space of childhood.

In its focus on the quest to reverse a fatal diagnosis, *Lorenzo's Oil* anticipates *The Cure*, in which a young boy, Dexter (Joseph Mazzello), has contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion.[3] Dexter is befriended—reluctantly at first—by his neighbor, Erik (Brad Renfro), a troubled boy who takes it upon himself to find a cure for AIDS in order to save his friend. Over the course of a summer, he experiments with a range of candy and plants in the hope of altering Dexter's fate; their quest culminates in a doomed odyssey down the Mississippi to New Orleans to visit a doctor featured in a sensationalist tabloid.

Harassed by bullies, who taunt them with cries of "faggot!" in the street, Erik and Dexter find solace in their unlikely friendship. Both boys are marginalized, Dexter through his illness and Erik through his proximity to Dexter and his failure to fit in. Despite being warned by his mother not to go near "that little AIDS boy," Erik discovers a sense of purpose in his quest to cure Dexter. Although Dexter eventually does die, his legacy is one of a more hopeful future for Erik.

In channeling one boy's death towards another boy's survival, *The Cure* has much in common with *The Mighty*, which, like *Lorenzo's Oil*, focuses on a boy with a degenerative condition. Kevin (Kieran Culkin, joining his older brother in portraying fragile boys on-screen) suffers from the life-limiting Morquio's syndrome. Like Lorenzo and Dexter, Kevin is rendered physically weakened by his condition, although this does not extend to his ability to communicate; Kevin, or "Freak," is a particularly intelligent child.

It is Max (Eldon Henson) who christens Kevin "Freak," and in many ways the boys are polar opposites, though neither embodies the traditions of energetic, assertive boyhood. Max is a shy, physically imposing boy who underperforms at school; Kevin's academic ability is enviable, but he is routinely knocked around by a gang of bullies. Like Dexter,

Kevin is small for his age and walks with the aid of crutches. Like Thomas J., he wears glasses, another signifier of his vulnerability. The physical weakness inscribed on the bodies of these boys only underlines their tenuous link to adult manhood.

Max and Kevin find that they are able to thwart their bullies by combining their strengths. Without Max's physical presence, Kevin's intelligence has limited impact. Similarly, Max has the power but not the brains to outwit their tormentors. When the boys are chased and threatened at a fireworks display, Max is able to hoist Kevin onto his shoulders and wade out into the middle of a lake, where they are safe. The two begin to gain confidence, with Max observing that, with Kevin on his shoulders, he becomes Kevin's feet while Kevin becomes his brain.

These images of their growing friendship provide the backbone of the film's narrative, and yet once again reveal an inherent weakness striking the heart of American boyhood. Only together are Kevin and Max able to prosper. Two boys become necessary to make one whole man. Later, after Kevin is given less than a year to live, he takes Max to a "biogenetics lab" (actually an industrial laundry), declaring that he wants a whole new body in order to become the "world's first biogenetically-enhanced human." Kevin's knowledge that he will never be enough on his own—that in order to survive, he will need to be engineered beyond his human capacities—underpins the construction of his boyhood as "not enough," in need of enhancement if survival is to be an option.

When the two boys venture outside, Kevin often invokes the "knight's code," based on his love of the King Arthur stories, which he is using to teach Max to read. Elements of fantasy begin to creep in here as Max uses a sewer grate as a shield to fend off the bullies, and visions of Arthur's knights appear to Kevin as he struggles to rescue Max from his criminal father. Whether these knights are symbols of empowerment, or simply a reminder

that Max and Kevin's combined strength is rooted in fiction, is debatable. What it does reveal, nevertheless, is a yearning for strength that never quite manifests in reality.

Fathers, sons, and narratives of failure

Nicole Marie Keating questions the importance of the father in the construction of cinematic boyhood, stating that "[i]mages of boyhood typically involve rituals such as playing ball (with Dad), but what happens when Dad is out of the picture?" (2005: 246). The answer, it seems, points to failure. The two boys at the center of *The Mighty* are both products of less-than-adequate fathers. Kevin's father disappears when his son is born and he is told of Kevin's condition. Max's father, meanwhile, is in prison for killing Max's mother. Max's grandparents observe that he is "all they have left" of their daughter, revealing Max as their thin thread of attachment to the future, as well as to their past. The specter of the absent, failed father lingers in *The Mighty*, suggesting that when "Dad is out of the picture," boys cannot be expected to thrive—indeed, in Kevin's case, to survive. Writing on men and masculinity at the end of the twentieth century, Susan Faludi argues that the fundamental roots of this perceived crisis lie in the failure that manifests in the relationship between fathers and sons. Faludi suggests that this relationship is all too often one characterized by disappointment. Observing that the sons of the late twentieth century felt that they were promised a world of power, privilege, and security that never quite emerged, she suggests that "they [the sons] could have weathered the disappointment of a broken patrimony. What undid them was their fathers' *silence*" (1999: 597). The inability of these men to articulate this new world to their sons contributes to a sense of psychological despair as the fathers retreat and the sons are left without the masculine guidance they crave. This lack of guidance contributes to the existential anxiety that manifests in these films as the figure of the weakened, dying boy.

Fatherhood and its failures also underpins *The Cure*, a film in which paternal figures are conspicuous by their absence. Dexter lives with his mother; the whereabouts of his father are never addressed. Erik's parents are divorced, and he lives with his mother, who drinks and is verbally and physically abusive. His father appears only as a disembodied voice on an answering machine, announcing his absence; undeterred, Erik claims that once he and Dexter arrive in New Orleans, his father has promised them a place to stay. Buried beneath his quest to find a cure for Dexter is Erik's desire for his father. A cure would mean a future for Dexter; finding his father would mean that Erik, too, could envisage his future as a young man.

Lorenzo's Oil also engages with issues of fatherhood, and in the end the film is as much about the father's fight as the boy's. Michaela is keen to focus her energies on spending time with Lorenzo before he dies. Augusto's drive, however, is towards curing his condition entirely. At an ALD conference, Michaela is troubled by the discussion of the other mothers, one of whom confides that her husband left the family because he "wanted more sons." ALD is a condition passed down exclusively through the mother, and though Augusto does not leave Michaela, in one frustrated moment he screams at his wife about her "poisoned blood." The actions of Augusto and the other fathers suggests a very paternal desire for proliferation beyond the self; the death of the son strikes at the foundations of manhood. Augusto finally acknowledges the apparent futility of their situation when he asks, "[D]o you ever think that all this struggle – it may have been for somebody else's kid?" Though there is a value in being able to save the lives of other boys, for Augusto this is still a form of failure since he has been unable to save his own son, and thus his own future.

Here, *Lorenzo's Oil* can be read as queering the process of reproduction by reducing the future to an unobtainable fantasy. Lee Edelman's work on reproductive futurism is instructive here in highlighting how investment in the child is a narcissistic venture that plays

on the collective human desire for immortality, a "genealogical fantasy that braces the social order" (2004: 44). It is this "genealogical fantasy" that is shattered in the event of the child's death; the father's expectation that he may live on through his son is shattered by the reality of Lorenzo's illness. Augusto's attempts to defy medical opinion and find a cure for ALD may provide respite for other parents—other fathers—down the line, but this does not change Augusto's predicament. He is a father facing the possibility of being without a son, and thus without a future. In turning their focus on dying boys, these films reveal an interruption of boyhood that ensures the figure of the boy is no longer the precursor to the figure of the man. Instead, he is cast adrift into an uncertain, perpetual boyhood whose only end is death. The father, likewise, is denied his own claim to the future, a fact that is reflected in the desertion of Kevin's father (and, perhaps, Dexter's father, too). Faced with the knowledge that their fatherhood will be temporary, they choose not to witness the collapse of their own future, represented in the death of the son.

Killing the future: queerness and the death of the child

As revealed in Truffaut's declaration that a child's death is a "ticklish matter" in cinema, there is a demand for meaning when a child dies on-screen. John Thompson suggests that for this death to be permitted to take place in the cinema, there must be a clear motivation and reason: "[t]o be a child on screen is to be *not anonymous enough* to die just for the sake of the explosion" (2003: 211). Thus Thompson highlights a fundamental need for the deaths of children—in this case, the deaths of boys—to be justified within the film's narrative, lest the film reveal a destabilization of the belief that children are sacred, recalling that "safe space" of Wilson's reckoning. Yet this is disrupted by the collapse of meaning that death inevitably brings about. This collapse of meaning results from death's ultimate unintelligibility, and it is here that death and queerness find their common ground. Edelman suggests that queerness

must seek to embrace the death drive as an alternative to the heteronormative drive of reproductive futurism. Further to this, the sheer unknowability of death makes it perhaps the queerest of all human states. The next section of the article will, therefore, consider the extent to which these films invite a queer reading in their subversion of a futuristic narrative, and the extent to which Vicky Lebeau's declaration is true: "Kill the child and you kill the future" (2008: 149).

The Cure is perhaps most explicit in revealing this queer tension, engaging as it does with the AIDS crisis, the same crisis that underpins Edelman's own "no future" thesis, in so far as it engages with the queerness of erasure. As Alan Nadel (1997) argues, films made in the 1990s often bear the scars of AIDS, regardless of whether or not they actively engage with the crisis. *The Cure* makes explicit what remains implicit in the other films discussed here (notwithstanding one parent's analogy between ALD and AIDS in *Lorenzo's Oil*). A child's death disrupts the expected timeline of death, just as AIDS does. Monica Pearl's assertion that AIDS is experienced in Western culture as an "unbearable meaninglessness" (1999: 212) is transposed onto the death of the child, an equally meaningless occurrence that disrupts our expectations of life, death, and meaning. If AIDS is "often perceived to have infected the nation as a whole" (Sturken 1997: 147), then it finds expression on-screen in the erasure of children and the shattering of meaning.

In his work on children and queerness, Paul Kelleher draws attention to the negotiation between nature and culture that children must navigate.

> While the notion of childhood is meant to signal and embody the pure plenitude of Nature, it will in fact name the place from which culture scandalously emerges—or, more accurately, *reemerges.* 'Childhood' marks the space in which nature and culture will do battle, without end, for authority. Culture, in

> short, is the repressed of Nature, and the peculiar fate of the 'child' demands that it both symbolize and negotiate this dangerous intersection (2004: 159).

As a space for negotiating boyhood, nature is often employed in film to embody the wildness and freedom of this stage of a young boy's life, "symbols of the collapse of the civilized forces of nature as contradistinguished from refined products of socialization and control" (Pomerance and Gateward 2005: 5). Nature is the boy's domain for the duration of his childhood, until his coming-of-age demands an entry into culture. In *My Girl*, however, nature is not a boy's sanctuary. Rather, it becomes a place of danger. Though Thomas J. and Vada spend much of their time in the woods, alone Thomas J. is tentative and vulnerable. On a quest to retrieve Vada's dropped mood ring, he disturbs a beehive and dies as a result of the stings. Rather than conquer nature, Thomas J. falls prey to it. Likewise, in *The Cure*, the pastoral setting provides a playground for Erik and Dexter. Yet it also becomes a site of danger when Dexter is poisoned by a plant and hospitalized. Their journey down the Mississippi bears the hallmarks of a boyish adventure, and yet in reality it is far from idyllic, culminating in their being chased by drifters who are deterred only by Dexter's threats of contamination from his "poison" blood. Nature claims Dexter, with the final scene showing his shoe carried downstream by the river, liberated from his coffin by Erik.

In a greater sense, the deaths of the boys in all of these films represent a victory for nature in its reclaiming of life. The death drive, that which must remain necessarily unconscious and so deniable to humans who exercise a conscious drive towards survival, cannot be satisfactorily suppressed. An early scene in *The Cure* is demonstrative of this inherent tension at the center of the death drive. Curious about the boy next door—of whom he knows nothing except his diagnosis—Erik attempts to glimpse Dexter through the fence

that separates their gardens. Fragments of Dexter's body are visible, but Erik is unable to piece together a complete picture of the boy with whom he is speaking. According to his mother's orders, Erik knows he should not be attempting to breach the barrier—"with that fence there, you won't catch anything"—and his fragmented glimpses of Dexter demonstrate the tension between wanting to avoid the reality of mortality and wanting to witness it.

Nevertheless, Thompson's earlier statement remains instructive, not only because these dying boys are far from anonymous—they are, after all, the central point of the narrative—but because their deaths are folded into the survival of other children, imbuing their deaths with meaning in the process. In *The Mighty*, Kevin's death is an inevitability. Max's situation, however, is not. Kevin's death is the catalyst for Max to flourish, standing up to his bullies and reveling in his newfound intellectual confidence. *The Mighty* ends with Max making reference to King Arthur. Having recounted the boys' adventures in a notebook, Max ends with the words, "Here lies Arthur, the Once and Future King." The words are an ode to the future, a disavowal of death as the end. If Kevin must die, then his legacy lives on in Max's own survival into manhood. Max is no longer the cowering boy of the beginning of the film, but a boy ready for, and worthy of, a future.

"The Once and Future King" is suggestive of continuation, of survival, of undiminished male power. Ellen Handler Spitz suggests that "[w]ith each newborn child comes the possibility of future salvation and a better world" (2011: 176). It is notable, therefore, that *The Once and Future King* is also the book that Michaela reads to Lorenzo as he lies motionless in bed. Realizing that "Lorenzo's oil" is having a positive effect, Michaela stops reading pre-school books to her son, and progresses to the King Arthur stories. The choice of title must be seen as significant: he who was once all-powerful will one day return. The theme of continuation also resonates with the paternal preoccupations these films reveal, linking the survival of father and son in a chain in which one is reliant upon the other.

Wilson (2003) argues that the fundamental difference between Hollywood's depictions of child death and those found in European and independent cinema lies in the capacity and propensity for reflection. The melancholia that infuses *Trois couleurs: Bleu* or *La stanza del figlio*, and the rumination that these films invite, is rejected in the films discussed here; they demand that the boy's death is resituated as part of a chain. If Kevin's life cannot continue, then he will live on in Max. Likewise, Dexter's death represents a new beginning for Erik, imbued with a confidence and sense of worth that remains Dexter's ultimate legacy. The same sentiment motivates the final scenes of *Lorenzo's Oil*, which ends with a montage of boys who are also suffering from ALD, yet have been helped by "Lorenzo's oil." Their cheerful faces are a testament to a wider future that they are able to access, thanks to the medical advancements brought about by Lorenzo's own predicament.

The channeling of the boy's death into the survival of another is a common theme among films depicting such a demise. *The Good Son*, mentioned briefly above, negotiates this trade between life and death in its final scenes in which Mark (Elijah Wood) is literally saved over his cousin Henry (Macaulay Culkin). Mark's status as the good child, over the disturbed Henry, ensures that it is he who will heal the family's wounds and progress beyond boyhood. Wood also portrays the saved child in *Paradise*, again acting as a panacea for a grieving family. In both films, his survival functions as much to save the father as it does to save himself.

My Girl, too, drives towards this same re-investment, and deviates only in the sex of the surviving child. Boyhood is rendered so vulnerable that it is Vada who is seen to survive in the film's final scenes. Here there is a determined shift towards adolescence and so not only to the future, but to a reproductive future. In Thomas J.'s presence, Vada is tomboyish and wary of her own developing body; she believes herself to be hemorrhaging when she first menstruates. Thomas J.'s death is the catalyst for Vada's entry into adolescent womanhood.

The film ends with a shot of Vada cycling through town with a female friend; rather than jeans or shorts, she wears a dress. The woods are permanently abandoned in favor of civilization. If nature has taken Thomas J., then culture has claimed Vada.

Conclusion

What these films ultimately reveal is the fragility of boyhood at the eve of the millennium. As the American century draws to a close, the willingness of Hollywood to place vulnerable boys on screen, and to bear witness to their deaths, must be read within the wider context of ongoing negotiations and constructions of masculinity—both on- and off-screen—during this same period. In particular, the debates over the role of the father, and the possibility of re-constructing a meaningful masculine identity around fatherhood, infuse these films with anxieties around survival and proliferation. The absence of a number of fathers in the same films is reflective of some of the key contemporary cultural and political debates surrounding parenthood and fatherhood noted above, chief among them the agonizing over absent and weakened fathers and the threat of "fatherless America" (Blankenhorn 1995: 1). Further to this, it is suggestive of a fracturing of the father-son relationship, and so the weakening of the process whereby boys learn to become men. This anxiety further manifests itself in the mortality of young boys and in the destabilization of the future that results from their deaths. Children retain their innocence but this is no longer enough to save either themselves, or the fathers they leave behind. An inherent tension is revealed here as these films highlight the way in which men are encouraged to invest in their children (and thus their fatherhood) during this period, and yet suggest that the "Restoration of the Father" has ultimately failed both the men and their sons.

The fact that these films emerge on the brink of a new millennium underlines the drive towards the future that is both crystallized in these films, and called into question.

President Clinton built much of his presidential rhetoric around the journey to the new millennium, and as the twentieth century's world power, the US looked towards this new era with the hope of maintaining its place in global politics and culture. The reality was not guaranteed to live up to the rhetoric, however. That Hollywood was preoccupied with narratives of mortality for its young boys reveals the roots of this millennial anxiety, centered on the concern that America—not to mention its men, and the boys who would become its men of the future—needed to survive. The answer, at least on-screen, is one of tentative hope for this uncertain future. The ultimate reinvestment in another child symbolizes the persistent drive towards the future that must propel Hollywood, and indeed society, towards a happier ending that is, ultimately, no ending at all, but the promise of a future.

Bio

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Notes

[1] This also excludes the deaths of adolescents in the teen horror subgenre that survived into the 1990s, including *Scream* (Wes Craven 1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie 1997), *Final Destination* (James Wong 2000), and their respective sequels. Death here functions primarily as a form of spectacle, largely detached from reality.

[2] The literary origins of a number of these films are worth noting here; the death of the child has long been a potent trope within literature, eliciting an emotional response from audiences. The 1990s saw another remake of *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong 1994), exposing a new audience to Beth's death. More recently, *The Fault in Our Stars* (Josh Boone 2014) achieved box office success with its depiction of two young teens with terminal cancer.

[3] Two years prior to this, Mazzello portrayed Tim in *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg 1993), another example of a recognisable boy actor being erased on-screen.